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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO BARRANQUILLA, JUNE 7, 2008

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Summary  
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¶1. (U) Ambassador visited Barranquilla, Atlantico Department, on June 7 to receive a major food donation funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and destined for the World Food Program (WFP). Barranquilla Mayor Alejandro Char, Atlantico Governor Eduardo Verano, and port President Fernando Arteta touted the Barranquilla port as key to Colombia's international trade. The commander of the port's Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS)-supported Colombian National Police antinarcotics unit briefed the Ambassador on local interdiction efforts. American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) members voiced hope for U.S. Congressional approval of the Colombian Trade Preference Agreement (CTPA). During a visit to the Mars Colombia factory, the Ambassador toured one of the most successful U.S. foreign direct investments in Colombia. He also joined a children's soccer game supported by a local civic group. The Ambassador received universally positive media coverage. End Summary.

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Outreach to the Most Vulnerable  
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¶2. (U) The Ambassador received USAID's 1620 metric ton donation of lentils, green peas, and vegetable oil and ceremonially turned it over to the WFP in a ceremony with WFP and local officials. USAID food donations are distributed to the neediest populations, including the displaced, other vulnerable groups, school children, and pregnant and lactating women, in 200 municipalities. The Ambassador highlighted President Bush's desire to increase the amount of international food aid to \$1 billion worldwide, and said the USG already provides 50% of the world's food aid.

¶3. (U) Over 150 children from Barrio La Paz, one of Barranquilla's poorest neighborhoods, turned out for a soccer match hosted by Futbol con Corazon. Futbol con Corazon, a local civic group, builds leadership, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills through its innovative soccer program for at-risk youth. Samuel Azout, founder of Futbol con Corazon and the largest investor in Payless Shoes' expansion into the Colombian market, highlighted the organization's commitment to strengthening at-risk communities by working with children and their families. The Ambassador's co-ed team of children aged 10-12 won 2-1. The event got great press, with pictures featuring the seriously sweating and out-of-shape Ambassador playing soccer with the children and donating 100 soccer balls to the teams.

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Local Goals for Development  
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¶4. (U) The governor, mayor, and port president outlined their goal to further expand Barranquilla's commercial relevance as a port, noting the limitations faced by neighboring ports in the tourist cities of Cartagena and Santa Marta. They emphasized the city's capacity to handle increased trade through its 23 sea and river port concessions. Mayor Char outlined Barranquilla's road infrastructure, highlighting the need for a beltway around the city. Governor Verano presented a proposal for Atlantico and Texas to become "brother states." The Ambassador recognized the similarities between the Houston and Barranquilla seaports, and urged for more outreach and exchange between the two cities.

¶5. (U) In discussions with the governor, mayor, and business community leaders at a luncheon hosted by the port, the Ambassador outlined goals for development in the coastal region, including the CTPA, ongoing USG investment in English language programs, assistance to increase flights between Barranquilla and the United States, as well as help in reviving the Caribbean coast's baseball league.

¶6. (SBU) The tour of the Mars Colombia facility in Barranquilla's Malambo free trade zone highlighted how foreign direct investment can positively impact local communities. The 104 Mars factory workers earn, on average, double what they earned prior to working for Mars. Mars opened its Barranquilla plant (under the name Masterfoods) in January, 2007 after initially considering investing in Venezuela. The Mars facility produces pet food products for regional distribution and is the regional distribution hub for imported Mars candies.

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Interdiction at Barranquilla Port  
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¶7. (SBU) Colombian National Police Captain Alexander Duarte, the port's anti-narcotics unit commander, outlined the challenges the interdiction unit faces in Barranquilla. He said the majority of exporters using the Barranquilla port are local producers known to the interdiction team. This facilitates the investigation process, since his unit regularly visits the exporters' factories and assesses their in-house security systems. Duarte reported that many exporters are satisfied with the rapid processing their goods receive once they arrive in the United States, attributing the expedited treatment to their active collaboration with law enforcement in Colombia. He said his unit reviews 100% of all shipments to Mexico, because the majority of drug shipments are directed there. The port's largest interdiction--seized on March 13--was a 4.2 ton shipment of cocaine bound for Mexico.

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PRESS COVERAGE  
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¶8. (U) Ambassador received outstanding print and broadcast press coverage throughout his visit, with the highlights being the food donation and the soccer game with local kids, showcasing the Ambassador's extraordinary athletic skills and USG soft side efforts to help the displaced. El Herald, the main Barranquilla-based daily (liberal, circ. 256,900/Sunday 298,400) ran stories on both Sunday and Monday following the visit. El Herald's coverage featured fantastic photos along with the title, "William Brownfield, an Excellent 'Gambeteador'" (double meaning: Football-player and tough question avoider). La Libertad, a small distribution daily based in Barranquilla, ran the headline: "Brownfield, an Ambassador with a Colombian Heart." El Tiempo (Colombia's largest and most influential daily, centrist, circ. 1,198,000/Sunday 2,247,300) gave great play to the significant donation of food to displaced and vulnerable Colombian populations orchestrated by USAID. RCN TV (the

largest private TV network, audience 9,467,300) and other broadcast outlets focused their coverage on the Ambassador's response to the question of whether the Manta base would move to Colombia. They quoted him as saying: "We are still waiting for the final decision from the Government of Ecuador."

BROWNFIELD